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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000501

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [FR](#) [CO](#) [EC](#) [BR](#) [CU](#)
SUBJECT: LATIN AMERICA: FRENCH SHARE SENSE OF POSITIVE
TRENDS, RETAIN SINGULAR FOCUS ON COLOMBIA-VENEZUELA HOSTAGE
SITUATION

Classified By: POL/MC Josiah Rosenblatt for Reasons 14.(B) and (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY. PDAS Craig Kelly reviewed Latin American priorities with MFA PDAS for Latin America Jean-Marc Laforet and DAS for Central America Jose Gomez on March 6. They concurred with Kelly,s assessment that the democratic governance and regional cooperation were improving across the region despite a negative press focus on the challenges posed by actors such as Venezuelan President Chavez. Laforet described French policy in Latin America as built around "strategic partnerships," as with Brazil, while noting the disproportionate role played by the Ingrid Betancourt hostage issue in Colombia. He described Chavez as the one who can win Betancourt,s freedom and asserted a French view that Venezuela remains a democracy, despite Chavez,s heavy-handed tactics. Laforet cited the referendum failure as the best example of this. On Cuba, Laforet noted France supports a democratic transition, but considered this unlikely before Fidel Castro leaves the political arena. Kelly outlined Chavez,s anti-democratic actions in Venezuela and urged France to support a democratic transition in Cuba. Comment: This dialogue on Latin America revealed an understanding of views on broad regional trends while sharpening some differences regarding Venezuela and Cuba. END SUMMARY

2. (C) On March 6, PDAS Kelly reviewed the positive trends in Latin America of the past two decades with Jean-Marc Laforet, MFA PDAS-equivalent for Latin American, and Jose Gomez, DAS-equivalent for Central America. PDAS Kelly noted the U.S. is optimistic about the future for the region, despite a press focus on the challenges posed by Venezuelan President Chavez. Most countries in the region are taking steps to open up their economies and strengthen democratic institutions to improve the lives of real people. These developments don't make headlines but ultimately they constitute the most important story in the region. Kelly explained U.S. thinking on Cuba transition, Colombia, and Venezuela. Laforet expressed general agreement noting France has observed political and economic improvements over the last 20 years. In contrast to the 1980,s, today France is not greatly concerned about the stability of Latin America. To underscore the point that security issues no longer dominate the regional agenda, Laforet said France will focus on energy, climate change, and the socio-economic situation as priorities during the May EU-Latin America Summit. Laforet described French policy in Latin America as anchored by "strategic partnerships" such as the one recently advanced with Brazil by President Sarkozy, while asserting that the Ingrid Betancourt hostage situation disproportionately dominates French policy in the region.

CHAVEZ

¶3. (C) The French view Venezuela as a democracy despite the Chavez,s heavy handed tactics. Citing his high-profile failure to win last fall,s referendum as an example of democracy's resilience in Venezuela, Laforet and Gomez portrayed Chavez as a "Bonapartist" leader who rejects checks and balances that hinder his direct dialogue with the people.

Laforet cast some blame for the radicalization of Venezuela on the opposition's decision to boycott elections, leaving Chavez a clear field. On bilateral U.S.-Venezuelan relations, Laforet expressed concern that Chavez,s anti-American rhetoric was gaining unhelpful resonance in Latin America. Finally, Laforet noted that in a private conversation with President Sarkozy, Chavez indicated he was amenable to improving relations with the United States. Chavez then went public with explosive and counter-productive remarks.

¶4. (C) Laforet lauded Chavez's mediation efforts on hostages and said France believes Chavez is the one to secure Betancourt,s release. He expressed frustration with Uribe's decision to end Chavez's role in hostage negotiations and noted Uribe treated Chavez badly by announcing the end of mediation to the press before notifying Chavez. Drawing parallels between the two leaders, Laforet observed both Chavez and Uribe enjoyed strong connections to their electorates.

¶5. (C) PDAS Kelly observed that Chavez's authoritarian and anti-democratic actions have eroded Venezuelans, freedoms. While the United States has refrained from getting into a shouting match with Chavez, we have made clear our concern for the restrictions on democratic space in Venezuela. Clearly, concern is rising within Venezuela, as the

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referendum made clear. Meanwhile, President Uribe in Colombia enjoys 80 percent approval ratings, in large part because he has brought about dramatic improvements in security, prosperity and human rights through his campaign against FARC terrorism and all forms of political violence.

THE FARC

¶6. (C) Laforet explained French willingness to consider a wide range of options to obtain the release of Betancourt as the result of the extreme pressure coming directly from President Sarkozy. Laforet described Chavez' suggestion that the FARC be taken off the terrorist list as "clumsy." Suggesting that some political status could be helpful in moving negotiations forward. Laforet said France is looking to some sort of compromise to acknowledge the FARC without giving it international recognition.

¶7. (C) Kelly noted U.S. policy placed the blame for the hostage-taking squarely on the FARC,s shoulders. We have great sympathy for all hostages, and want to prevent future hostage taking. Meanwhile we strongly support Uribe,s campaign against the FARC. Noting that the FARC had abused the peace efforts of previous Colombian presidents, Kelly pointed out that Uribe's tough stance has achieved dramatic improvements in the security situation - as Secretary Rice's recent trip to Medellin with a congressional delegation made clear. As a result, the economy is growing and Colombia enjoys growing integration in global trade. We want to encourage these trends. That is why we are pressing for congressional ratification of our Free Trade Agreement with Colombia. Laforet acknowledged Colombia's progress and said the French government supports Uribe,s security policy.

CUBA-French Support Release of Prisoners and Democratic Change

¶8. (C) PDAS Kelly stated this was a historic opportunity for Cubans to determine the future of their country; now is the time for democracies around the world to support the

Cuban people in their desire for real change. Cuba's future is for the Cubans, not outsiders, to determine, but the people need the freedom to exercise choices. Kelly pressed France to support the liberation of political prisoners and the movement toward democratic institutions. Laforet agreed the democracies should strive to halt the regime's human rights abuses, but Laforet lamented that direct pressure does not seem to work. The international community should consider "appropriate tactics" to attain our objectives. Laforet noted that Raul Castro might be an engine for some change in Cuba, but a real transition was not possible until Fidel left the scene.

BRAZIL

¶9. (C) On the broader French policy towards Latin America, Laforet said France is building its policy in the region around "strategic partnerships" such as the one advanced by President Sarkozy's February 12 meeting with Brazilian President Lula da Silva. He added Brazilian support is important to address many international challenges and that France supports according Brazil its "appropriate place" in international institutions such as an expanded G8 and UN Security Council. Laforet added that Brazil is well placed to mediate between Colombia and Venezuela. Citing the U.S.'s good relations with Brazil, PDAS Kelly agreed that Brazilian President Lula is playing a constructive role in various regional crises. This is good for the hemisphere. The United States has made a major commitment to upgrade its relationship with Brazil in many concrete areas, including the economy, biofuels, culture and education.

¶10. (U) PDAS Kelly cleared this message.

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